

Utapped Resources: County Records as a Lens into the Past

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For the casual observer local government records have a limited usefulness, as they bear witness to the intricacies of a bureaucratic structure, supply data for the work of the statistician, or provide the documentation necessary to verify citizenship, confirm land ownership, or prove marital status. But for the archivist, the professional entrusted with the responsibility of preserving such records, these same documents can yield unexpected, but rich, treasure that awaits discovery. As an example, the property maps, developed by the County Auditor to aid in the assessment of land value for purpose of taxation, are important for the work of the appraiser and of interest to the title examiner as well. But where those individuals examine the records to determine names of owners, dates of title transfer, property boundaries, and presence of structures, the archivist, genealogist and historian study the maps to see reflected the image of the land developer, and the faces of the farmers, immigrants, and merchants, who invested in the land; to visualize the appearance of the brick or frame dwelling that might have been home to a growing family or elderly couple; and to perceive the emerging shape of a neighborhood as it developed over time. This presentation, then, will specifically explore the untapped potential of county records, including maps, tax duplicates, wills and naturalization papers, to serve as a lens into the past, illuminating and revealing the establishment and growth of rural communities and urban centers, with a clear focus on identifying those men and women, from farmers to entrepreneurs, artisans to scholars, and native born sons and daughters to immigrants in search of a new life, who settled the lands of the Western Reserve.